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Belonging in the First-Year Law Classroom: Preliminary Reflections from a South Australian Case Study

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BELONGING IN THE FIRST-YEAR LAW CLASSROOM: PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS FROM A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN CASE STUDY

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I   INTRODUCTION

Australian law students face many challenges when it comes to engaging positively with their studies. They may live in regional or remote locations, have caring responsibilities, live with a disability, or come from a disadvantaged socio-economic background. [1] Even students with strong external support systems can struggle to adapt to the demanding learning environment associated with completing a professionally accredited law degree.[2] For first-year law teaching staff, it can feel like these wonderful, clever, students are 'falling off the cliff' when it comes to navigating their way towards to sustained academic participation in the law program.

This article reports the findings of the *Belonging in the Law Classroom Project* (*Belonging Project*) – a qualitative research project undertaken during 2022 with the support of an UniSA Early Career Researcher Teaching and Learning Grant. The *Belonging Project* aimed to improve the experience and retention of first-year Law students by better understanding and fostering their sense of belonging in the online or physical classroom.

The article begins by describing concepts of student belonging and related pedagogical approaches and methods, including exploring the potential for dialogic and funds of knowledge approaches to promote first-year student belonging and confidence in the classroom. It then discusses the results of the *Belonging Project* before offering some thoughts on how to translate insights into belonging into practical

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[1]   University of South Australia, 'UniSA 2021 Annual Review' (Report, June 2022) 6; Fiona Burns et al, 'Financial and Caregivers' Stressors in Australian Law Students: A Qualitative Analysis' (2019) 26(3) *Psychiatry Psychology Law* 343.

[2]   Molly Townes O'Brien and Stephen Tang, 'Law School too Hard? Why the Struggle Could be a Good One', *The Conversation,* (Web Page, 23 September 2013) <https://theconversation.com/law-school-too-hard-why-the-struggle-could-be-a-good-one-17989>; Natalie K Skead, Shane L Rogers and W Rupert Johnson, 'The Role of Place, People and Perception in Law Student Well-Being' (2020) 73 *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry.*

strategies for teachers. These strategies include ensuring a priority focus on the quality of 'first encounters' between student and teaching staff, deliberately and explicitly unpacking the 'hidden curriculum' associated with successful study in the law discipline, and adopting teaching strategies that actively encourage students to co-design what a 'good law student' looks like, drawing upon students' own lived experiences.

By focusing on student belonging *in the classroom*, the *Belonging in the Law Classroom Project* (the *Belonging Project*) provides a fresh perspective for teaching staff within the law discipline to understand student retention and engagement and create space for programmatic approaches to curriculum review and assessment. It does this by shifting the focus from institutional and extracurricular strategies to encourage student belonging and engagement[3] towards considerations of how student belonging might play out at the educational interface.[4]

II   WHAT IS 'STUDENT BELONGING' AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The concept of 'belonging' is an intrinsically human desire, born of the need to feel 'at home' with a group of other people, or within a particular place or environment, connected to the idea of social inclusion and acceptance, and a pre-condition to establishing positive relationships with others.[5] As Meehan and have explained, students' sense of belonging has been connected to successful transition into higher education and to positive learning and wellbeing outcomes.[6]

However, as Blake, Capper and Jackson noted in a 2022 study on 'Building Belonging in Higher Education', it can be challenging to articulate with precision what 'belonging' means in specific contexts. Following an analysis of 'rich and varied' data encapsulating experiences and insights from students and university staff, the authors were able to reveal:

> a multitude of ways in which feelings of belonging are established, nurtured and hindered in universities. While the factors that promote belonging vary by person and personality, there are recurring themes within our data, which

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[3]   Terence V Bowles and Kimberley A Brindle, 'Identifying Facilitating Factors and Barriers to Improving Student Retention Rates in Tertiary Teaching Courses: A Systematic Review' (2017) 36(5) *Higher Education Research & Development* 903.

[4]   J Thompson and D Houston, 'Programmatic Assessment Condensed: Introducing Progress Testing Approaches to a Single Semester Paramedic Subject' (2020) 17(3) *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 195; T Migliaccio and J Carrigan, 'Producing Better Writers in Sociology: A Programmatic Approach' (2017) 45(3) *Teaching Sociology* 228.

[5]   A Barthakur, S Joksimovic, V Kovanovic, R F Mello, M Taylor, M Richey and A Pardo, 'Understanding Depth of Reflective Writing in Workplace Learning Assessments Using Machine Learning Classification' (2022) 15(5) *Transactions on Learning Technologies* 567.

[6]   C Meehan, and K Howells, 'In Search of the Feeling of "Belonging" in Higher Education: Undergraduate Students Transition into Higher Education' (2019) 43(10) *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 1376.

come together to form four foundational areas: connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy.[7]

This four-factor conceptualisation of 'belonging', with its dual emphasis on relational aspects and individual perceptions, aligns with findings of this much smaller-scale investigation of 'belonging' within the context of the South Australian first-year law classroom.

A number of recent studies[8] have identified a relationship between retention and students' reported sense of belonging; both of which may serve as indicators of student engagement. [9] The literature often describes student belonging as having different component parts or domains, sometimes described as 'situational, dispositional, and institutional',[10] other times described as academic, social, surroundings and personal space.[11] Scholars generally agree that in order to realise the benefits of fostering student belonging, attention needs to be given to all of these different components or domains. [12] Gravett and Ajjawi have suggested 'reframing of belonging as situated, relational and processual', and thinking about belonging as an experience that can be explored across diverse teaching modalities and considered to be equally relevant for both face-to-face and online teaching and learning experiences.[13] This reframing can be particularly valuable in the post COVID-19 environment, following what has been described as an 'enforced online migration' to emergency remote teaching [14] where 'educators are increasingly preoccupied with questions pertaining to how to engage their students, how to foster a sense of community, and

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7   Sunday Blake, Gail Capper, and Anna Jackson, 'Building Belonging in Higher Education: Recommendations for Developing an Integrated Institutional Approach' (Research Report, Wonkhe and Pearson, October 2022) 5, <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf >.

8   See M Y Ahn and H H Davis, 'Four Domains of Students' Sense of Belonging to University' (2020) 45(3) *Studies in Higher Education* 624, 634; Evianne L van Gijn-Grosvenor and Penelope Huisman, 'A Sense of Belonging Among Australian University Students' (2020) 39(2) *Higher Education Research & Development* 376, 389; Brendon Mahoney, Jennifer Kumar and Mohammed Sabasi, 'Strategies for Student Belonging: The Nexus of Policy and Practice in Higher Education' (2022) 13(3) *Student Success Journal* 54; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 'Good Practice Note: Improving Retention and Completion of Students in Australian Higher Education' (Australian Government, 2020) <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/guides-resources/resources/good-practice-notes/good-practice-note-improving-retention-and-completion-students-australian-higher-education>; Sarah O'Shea, 'Why Does Student Retention and Success Matter?' in Mahsood Shah, Sally Kift and Liz Thomas (eds), *Student Retention and Success in Higher Education: Institutional Change for the 21st Century* (Springer International Publishing AG, 1st ed, 2021) 17, 40.

9   KL Krause, and L Armitage, 'Australian Student Engagement, Belonging, Retention and Success: A Synthesis of the Literature' (2014) *The Higher Education Academy* 1.

10   Bowles and Brindle (n 3); Krause and Armitage (n 9); Ahn and Davis (n 8).

11   Ahn and Davis (n 8).

12   See Bowles and Brindle (n 3); Ahn and Davis (n 8).

13   Karen Gravett and Rola Ajjawi, 'Belonging as Situated practice' (2021) 47(2) *Studies in Higher Education,* 1.

14   Joseph Kee-Ming Sia et al, 'Transitioning from Online Teaching to Blended Teaching in the Post-Pandemic Era: What Has COVID-19 Taught Us?' (2023) 10(2) *Cogent Education* <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2282313>.

how to develop a sense of belonging within online and hybrid learning contexts'.[15]

Other scholars, such as Duncan, Field and Strevens,[16] and Jackson[17] and have investigated the relationship between student wellbeing and student engagement in different contexts within Australian law schools, underscoring the importance of maintaining a strong focus on the social conditions students experience when engaging in legal education. This makes exploring student and teacher conceptions of belonging in different classroom contexts a vital task for all law teachers and faculties keen to improve learning outcomes and promote student wellbeing.

III   THE BELONGING PROJECT

A   *Aims and Objectives*

The *Belonging Project* aimed to foster student belonging among first-year students, enrolled in the UniSA Law Program, and attending compulsory first-year courses currently prescribed under the Standard Australian Law Curriculum.

The *Belonging Project* sought to re-frame thinking about student belonging within the law discipline to focus on the educational interface. This re-frame offers new opportunities to transcend conventional limits on strategies to enhance student engagement, which have previously had a strong focus on social belonging through extracurricular activities.[18] The goal of the *Belonging Project* is to equip teachers with the tools and strategies they need to help students integrate into the academic domain of university learning within the law discipline context, providing students with what Krause and Armitage describe as social learning spaces (both formal and informal).[19] The *Belonging Project* also recognises that students' sense of belonging is co-constructed in the classroom, with students, peers, and teachers together; in conjunction with specific student engagement initiatives at

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[15]   Gravett (n 13) 1.

[16]   Nigel Duncan, Rachel Field, and Caroline Strevens, 'Ethical Imperatives for Legal Educators to Promote Law Student Wellbeing' (2020) 23(1-2) *Legal Ethics* 65.

[17]   See Melanie Jackson and Lisa Du Plessis, 'Breaking the Silence (Part 1): Understanding Social Anxiety in Law Students', (Web Page, 15 October 2023), < https://www.cple.blog/posts/breaking-the-silence-part-1-understanding-social-anxiety-in-law-students/>.

[18]   See, eg, Ella Kahu and Karen Nelson, 'Student Engagement in the Educational Interface: Understanding the Mechanisms of Student Success', (2018) 37(1) *Higher Education Research & Development* 58; Terrell L Strayhorn, *College Students' Sense of Belonging* (Routledge, 2nd ed, 2018); Darris R Means and Kimberly Pyne, 'Finding My Way: Perceptions of Institutional Support and Belonging in Low-Income, First-Generation, First-Year College Students' (2017) 58(6) *Journal of College Student Development* 907; Karma L Pearce, 'Building a Sense of Belonging and Connectedness: What Extra-curricular Activities do International Students Really Want?', (2015) 23(1) *Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association* 31.

[19]   Krause and Armitage (n 9).

the Program, Unit, and institutional level.[20] It aims to gather and share existing best practice, with a view to integrating or embedding belonging and transition strategies across the broader law program.[21]

B   Pedagogical Approaches and Methods

Pedagogical Approaches

The conceptual framework underpinning the *Belonging Project* was informed by dialogic and funds of knowledge pedagogies, as well as recent literature specifically focused on belonging in an educational context.[22] Dialogic approaches[23] provide students with opportunities to talk and explore within the classroom setting, as well as connecting with their life worlds and funds of knowledges[24] to help students identify the existing skills and resources that they bring to the law studies.

As Kim and Wilkinson have explained, dialogic teaching is an approach that 'capitalizes on the power of talk to further students' thinking, learning, and problem solving'.[25] It is an approach to learning and teaching that has been shown to improve performance in students' content knowledge, comprehension, and reasoning well beyond the time of initial engagement with the discourse.[26] Alexander suggests that dialogic teaching practice is:[27] collective (teachers and students address

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[20]   Sarah Hattam and Jennifer Stokes, 'Liberation and Connection; Fostering critical students as active agents of their own learning', in Angela Jones, Anita Olds, Joanne G. Lisciandro (eds) *Transitioning Students into Higher Education,* (Routledge, 1st ed, 2019); Angela Jones, Anita Olds and Joanne G. Lisciandro, '*Transitioning Students into Higher Education Philosophy, Pedagogy and Practice'* (1st edition, Routledge 2020); van Gijn-Grosvener and Huisman (n 8); Ella R Kahu, Karen Nelson and Catherine Picton,'Pathways to Engagement: A Longitudinal Study of the First-year Student Experience in the Educational Interface', (2020) 79(1) *Higher Education*, 657.

[21]   See Sally Kift 'A decade of Transition Pedagogy: A Quantum Leap in Conceptualising the First-year Experience' (2015) 2 *HERDSA Review of Higher Education* 50; Kahu and Nelson (n 18); see also Mahsood Shah, Sally Kift and Liz Thomas, *Student Retention and Success in Higher Education: Institutional Change for the 21st Century* (Springer International Publishing AG, 1st ed, 2021).

[22]   See Ahn and Davis (n 8); van Gijn-Grosvener and Huisman (n 8); Bowles and Brindle (n 3); Mahoney, Kumar and Sabasi (n 8).

[23]   See Kim Min-Young and Ian A G Wilkinson, 'What is Dialogic Teaching? Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing a Pedagogy of Classroom Talk' (2019) 21 *Learning Culture and Social Interaction* 70.

[24]   Norma González, 'The Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project' (1995) 17(3) *Practicing Anthropology* 3, 6; see also Mariona Llopart and Moisès Esteban-Guitart, 'Funds of Knowledge in 21st Century Societies: Inclusive Educational Practices for Under-Represented Students' (2018) 50(2) *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 145, 161.

[25]   See, eg, Kim and Wilkinson (n 23) 83. Diana Laurillard, *Rethinking University Teaching: A Conversational Framework for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies* (Taylor and Francis, 2nd ed, 2013).

[26]   Lauren B Resnick and Christa Asterhan and Sharice Clarke, 'Introduction: Talk, Learning, and Teaching' in Lauren Resnick, Christa Asterhan, Sherice Clarke (eds) *Socializing Intelligence through academic talk and dialogue,* (AERA books 2015) 251.

[27]   Robin Alexander, 'Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk' (17th Biennial EARLI Conference, Finland, 2017) 28 <https://cprtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/EARLI-2017-paper-170825.pdf 1-35>

learning tasks together); reciprocal (teachers and students listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints); supportive (students can articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over 'wrong' answers); cumulative (teachers and students build on their own and each other's ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry) and purposeful (teachers plan and facilitate dialogic teaching with particular educational goals in view). As described below, these elements were incorporated into the methodological design of the *Belonging Project*, as well as the teaching support outputs that have been generated following the completion of the project.

The design and implementation of the *Belonging Project* was also influenced by the 'funds of knowledge' approach. This approach is described by Gonzalez as an approach to learning and teaching which seeks to build strategically on the experiences, resources, and knowledge of students,[28] particularly those from low socio-economic or linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. This approach values the lived experience of students – the contributions they make and the work they do in their homes and communities – as being directly relevant to their learning in an institutional setting. [29] Using this approach, the *Belonging Project* recognised that student experiences of the way the law is made and enforced, particularly when they are different from 'mainstream' experiences, are not only relevant to their own interaction with law curriculum content, but also are a source of new knowledge for the teacher and other students in the class.

Using these approaches, the *Belonging Project* explored how in-class discussions can help transform social relations in the classroom and raise awareness of social relations in the community at large.[30] It also aimed to employ a 'problem posing participatory framework'[31] that aims to transcend the fixed relationship of teacher providing information and student receiving that information, into a more dynamic relationship, where teacher and student learn from each other through a dialectic exchange. [32] These approaches are connected to 'enabling pedagogy'[33] which aims to contest the 'simplistic opposition

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[28]   Luis C Moll et al, 'Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms' (1992) 31(2) *Qualitative Issues in Educational Research* 132; Judy Marquez Kiyama and Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, '*Funds of Knowledge in Higher Education Honoring Students' Cultural Experiences and Resources as Strengths'* (Routledge, 1st ed, 2018).

[29]   Moises Esteban-Guitart, 'Funds of Identity: A new concept based on the funds of Knowledge approach', (2014) 20(1) *Culture of Psychology*, Gloria M Rodriguez, 'Power and Agency in Education: Exploring the Pedagogical Dimensions of Funds of Knowledge', (2013) 31(1) *Review of Research in Education*, 87.

[30]   Ira Shor and P Freire, 'What is the "Dialogical Method" of Teaching?' (1987) 169(3) *Journal of Education*, 11.

[31]   Neil O Houser, 'Problem Posing in Teacher Education: A Freirian Approach' (2007) 29 *Action in Teacher Education* 43.

[32]   Shor and Freire (n 30).

[33]   Anna Bennett, Sara Motta, Emma Hamilton, Cathy Burgess, Bronwyn Relf, Kim Gray, Sharlene Leroy-Dyer and Jim Albright, *Enabling Pedagogies A Participatory Conceptual Mapping of Practices at the University of Newcastle, Australia* (University of Newcastle, 2020)

between the 'knower' (researchers and teachers) and 'objectified subjects to know and teach' (students and research participants)'.[34]

Methods

In line with the above pedagogical approaches, the *Belonging Project* was explorative in nature. The first stages of the *Belonging Project* employed a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative surveys with qualitative focus group interviews to provide a more holistic understanding of student belonging from both student and teacher perspectives.[35] To analyse the focus group data we used a combination of research notes, observations and transcripts to draft de-identified focus group reports which were considered and endorsed by focus group participants before being coded by researchers to identify key themes across the different qualitative and quantitative data sources.[36] This was complemented by the use of participatory methods to co-design the project outputs, involving students and teachers as collaborators and co-designers of toolkits and strategies for fostering belonging in future law classrooms.[37]

The pedagogical and methodological approaches underpinning the *Belonging Project* have been influenced by what Cochran-Smith and Lytle describe as 'teacher research as stance':

> Taking an inquiry stance means teachers and students teachers working with communities to generate local knowledge, envision and theorize their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others. Fundamental to this notion is the idea that the work of inquiry communities is both social and political – that is, it involves making problematic the current arrangements of schooling, the ways knowledge is constructed, evaluated, and used, and teachers' individual and collective roles in bringing about change.[38]

<https://www.newcastle.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/462272/Enabling-Pedagogies-Research-Report.pdf>.

[34]   Ibid 8.

[35]   Dina C Maramba, and Samuel D Museus, 'The Utility of Using Mixed-Methods and Intersectionality Approaches in Conducting Research on Filipino American Students' Experiences with the Campus Climate and on Sense of Belonging' (2011) 151 *New directions for institutional research* 93, 94-95.

[36]   Susan R Jones, Vasti Torres and Jan Arminio, *Negotiating the Complexities of Qualitative Research in Higher Education: Fundamental Elements and Issues* (Routledge, 2013) 89.

[37]   Sandra Hollingsworth et al, 'Action Research and the Personal Turn' in Susan E Norffke and Bridget Somekh (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Educational Action Research* (Sage, 2009) 62; Gordon Wells, 'Dialogic Inquiry as Collaborative Action Research' in Susan E Norffke and Bridget Somekh (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Educational Action Research*, (Sage Publications Ltd, 2009) 50; Hattam and Stokes (n 20).

[38]   Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L Lytle, 'Teacher Research as Stance' in Susan E Norffke and Bridget Somekh (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Educational Action Research* (Sage Publications Ltd, 2009) 44.

This approach has parallels with 'action research' methodologies[39] which often utilise qualitative and quantitative methods to collect the 'evidence' of impact of various teaching interventions. These methods invite the teacher-researcher to engage in reflective practice when interacting with students in the classroom. This can mean asking questions like:

- What did I do differently?;
- What happened to my pedagogy when I tried something different?; and
- How did that affect how I understand my students?

In line with these approaches, the *Belonging Project* was undertaken in the following three key stages:

1   *Stage 1: Listen and Explore.*

This involved engaging with data derived from student evaluation of teaching and learning surveys and undertaking a series of focus group interviews with first-year law teachers and current and former law students, conducted by a focus group facilitator in small group settings either in person or online. The two high level themes explored at this stage were (1) what student belonging means for first-year law students and teachers and (2) what practices have been employed in the law classroom toward fostering a sense of student belonging.

Ethics approval was provided to conduct qualitative research with three groups,[40] first-year students (referred to as the 'first-year group'), student law association committee and law school alumni (referred to as the 'experienced students group'), and first-year course coordinators lecturers and tutors (referred to as the 'educators group'). A purposive sample strategy was employed to select interviewees across these cohorts.[41]

The educators group comprised of five participants including three teaching staff occupying continuing teaching positions, and two teaching staff employed on casual contracts. All participants in this focus group taught first-year courses with the Law Program. The first-year group comprised of fifteen participants selected on the basis of (a) current enrolment status in the first-year Law Program (b) interest and availability in taking part in a focus group discussion; (c) geographic location (a diversity of metro and outer metro based students were selected) (d) their age (a diversity of ages were selected) (e) their grade range (students with a diversity of current academic achievement were selected) and (f) their status as a domestic or international student (a

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[39]   Hollingsworth et al (n 37); Gordon Wells, 'Dialogic Inquiry as Collaborative Action Research' in Susan E Norffke and Bridget Somekh (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Educational Action Research*, (Sage Publications Ltd, 2009) 50; Hattam and Stokes (n 20).

[40]   University of South Australia Ethics Protocol Number: 204621.

[41]   Oliver C Robinson, 'Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide' (2014) 11(1) *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 25, 32.

diversity of domestic and international students were selected). The experienced students group comprised of four participants selected on the basis of (a) current enrolment status in the final or penultimate year of the law program (b) interest and availability in taking part in a focus group discussion (c) their geographic location (a diversity of metro and outer metro based students were selected) (d) their age (a diversity of ages were selected) and (e) their grade range (students with a diversity of current academic achievement were selected). Each focus group was asked a set of questions in a face to face or zoom setting and responses were recorded without attributing comments to any specific individual.

A total of three focus group sessions were conducted, two via zoom and one face-to-face. The demographics of the first-years were a mix of domestic (majority of the participants), international and mature age students. Most students were under 25, entering university from high school, with some students coming from other tertiary disciplines or had been a long time between studying. Within both the first-year group and the experienced students group there were a small number of students who had gained employment in legal profession before starting their degree. Many others were employed in non-legal sectors.

Potential focus group participants were provided with information to ensure that they understood the purpose of the research and that their participation would not impact their relationship with any university teaching staff. An independent focus group facilitator was used to help alleviate the risks and participants' fears of studies, grades or employment being affected. Participants also had the opportunity to review the focus group reports and redact comments or offer further information.

The small sample size reflected in these focus groups, with the first-year group constituting approximately 10% of the total first-year cohort for the UniSA Law Program in 2022, presents significant limitations, potentially compromising the reliability of key findings, and the ability to extrapolate general themes or trends across broader student populations. However, the mixed methods approach helped to contextualise the data obtained through the focus group interviews alongside broader student evaluation of learning and teaching surveys. This in turn provides an opportunity to reflect on how these localised insights might align with or depart from existing literature relating to belonging in law-school settings.

2   *Stage 2: Collate and Develop*

This stage involved the identification of themes around what belonging means to students in the first-year law program teaching context. These findings were used to develop the first iteration of the *LearnOnline* site resource[42] for use by first-year law teachers, including sessional and casual teaching staff, at UniSA. Feedback was then

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42   The LearnOnline is UniSA's online learning platform. Teaching staff can also access LearnOnline as a professional development platform and a shared repository for lesson plans and other classroom supports.

sought from other first-year law teachers around Australia[43] as well as colleagues from within the University [44] as to the examples and strategies selected for inclusion and belonging within the *Learnonline* site.

3   Stage 3: Share and Enhance

This stage involved sharing the *LearnOnline* site with first-year law teachers and broader law discipline colleagues to provide an interactive platform for staff to access and share examples and prompts that can be used in teaching practice. This platform has since been utilised as a training resource for new teaching staff within the Law discipline and remains a dynamic collection of ideas and suggestions for classroom activities and reflective teaching practice.

IV   RESULTS

The reflections gathered through the above methods reveal insights into how belonging in the law classroom is perceived by students and teachers, and help identify specific practices, approaches or environments that might maximise the potential for belonging to be experienced.

Common themes emerged from all three focus groups orientated around connection and communication, with a particularly strong emphasis on the significance of first or initial connections and communications between teachers and students, and between student peers. There was a consensus, for example, that effective and respectful communication among all participants in the learning environment creates the right conditions for peer to peer or student-teacher connections to be made, which then in turn helps to create a sense of belonging. Other common themes expressed during the focus groups include the relationship between student belonging and student engagement and participation in class, which increases in teaching environments that prioritise positivity and emotional and social safety. These themes reflect the conceptualisations of belonging articulated by Blake, Capper and Jackson, which include a focus on 'connection', 'inclusion' and 'support'.[45] However, while there was a congruence among focus groups about the preconditions that foster student belonging, there was divergence and as to how to facilitate these conditions in practice. However, while there was a congruence among

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[43]   For example via the Higher Education Research Group of Adelaide (HERGA), (Annual Conference 2022, Adelaide, 27 September, 2022); the Australasian Law Academics Association, (Conference 2022, Melbourne, 7-9 July 2022); *National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia Conference*: *Reimagining Enabling in Higher Education*, University of South Australia, 5-6 December 2022, Adelaide.

[44]   See, eg, Sarah Moulds, 'Belonging in the Law Classroom' (UniSA Teaching and Learning Symposium 2022, Adelaide, 18 November 2022) Sarah Moulds, 'Belonging in the Law Classroom'(UniSA Law Discipline Meeting, Adelaide, 5 December 2022).

[45]   The authors also included the concept of 'autonomy' as central to belonging. See Blake, Capper and Jackson (n 7) 5-7.

focus groups about the preconditions that foster student belonging, there was divergence and as to how to facilitate these conditions in practice. Some of the key insights shared are summarised below.

A   *What Does 'Belonging' Mean to You?*

The first-year group articulated the concept of 'belonging' with reference to environmental and relational factors. This group described 'belonging' as experiencing 'mutual respect' among their peers, and between teachers and students – coupled with a sense of 'trust' within the classroom. The first-year group also described 'belonging' as experiencing kindness and empathy from teachers, and feeling 'seen' as people rather than solely 'law students'. Access to relevant teaching support was also important for creating a sense of 'belonging' for first-year students. first-year students needed to know that they 'can reach out to the teacher with a problem' and that their teacher was 'setting them up to win, being their cheer squad'. For some participants in this group, 'belonging' meant that the burden of the student experience, including navigating study workload and managing anxiety around assessment, is collectively shared among all classroom members, and not left to individuals to navigate alone or outside of classroom settings. Suggestions included that that teaching staff would use class time to share practical strategies about managing anxiety ahead of assessment or create supportive one on one or small group opportunities for students to ask questions, share their worries or compare study techniques or strategies.

Environmental factors were also considered central to belonging for students in the first-year group, including the need for the classroom learning space to be 'interactive, intuitive and interpersonal', where participation was encouraged, and where students genuinely felt that there were 'no stupid questions'. For the first-year student group, peer to peer student collaboration was an essential factor in developing a sense of belonging. Strategies that worked well for encouraging peer to peer interaction included: in-class discussions as one larger group coupled with smaller group interactions, facilitated debates on topics, posing alternative points of view and working through problems in class by building a sense of community. Creating relaxed opportunities for students to 'cheer each other on' to get to the other side of the first assessment or exam were also considered important. However, the first-year student group made a clear distinction between the value of group work in class or in formative assessment (which they highly valued) and group-based summative assessments (which they felt were less positive forums for developing a sense of belonging).

The experienced students group expressed the view that 'belonging' meant the classroom was a safe space that is familiar and comfortable. This group explained that 'belonging' meant that individuals felt part of a group of learners, with a growing confidence leading to active participation in class. Evidence of belonging in the classroom includes asking questions, initiating discussions, and wanting to 'step up' with their work performance. For this group, building positive relationships

with educators was a crucial component to achieving a sense of belonging. Transferring control to students to build the social aspects of the classroom, or to contribute to social life on campus more broadly, was also seen as important to belonging. For example, it helps if students can see the impact of active participation in extracurricular activities on their studies and future career opportunities in the highly compatible field of law. This aligns with the 'autonomy' element of belonging identified and explored by Blake, Capper and Jackson in their 2022 study on student belonging.[46]

One student in the experienced students group described the idea of belonging as being connected to developing a sound understanding of what is expect of them, and what they can expect from others, as law students. For some students within the experienced students focus group, mandatory attendance at face-to-face classes was seen to be an important way to improve and maintain engagement and retention and promote student belonging.

These views were also reflected in the comments from the educators' group who also observed that students who feel they belong have a sense of freedom and confidence, and feel empowered to interact with peers and teachers openly within the classroom. For these teachers, the social environment within and outside the law classroom is particularly critical to measuring 'belonging'. For this group, a student who 'belongs' is comfortable contributing to building a positive classroom culture, knows their peers' names, and can talk with them casually about a range of topics, including those relevant to the subject matter of the course, as well as those relevant to other students' lived experiences.

B   *Can You Remember When You Felt Like You Belonged in the First-Year Law Classroom?*

Respect among peers was essential to the first-year group's sense of belonging in the classroom. Students who recalled a sense of belonging described feeling listened to, and their comments were met with positivity, not laughs or whispers. Some students shared their experiences of teachers regaining control of a disorderly classroom as an act that supported a sense of belonging. When students saw an educator going 'above and beyond', for example providing further readings, helping a student outside of the classroom, or offering alternative learning examples, this was a powerful sign that the teacher genuinely cared about them and their learning, and it was something the first-year group said assisted in the development of a sense of belonging.

Similarly, most of the students in the experienced students group also pointed to the significant role educators play in creating a sense of student belonging. These students explained that if the educator appeared interested in the students collectively and individually, in their lives outside of being a student, and actively showed they wanted the

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[46]   Blake, Capper and Jackson (n 7) 5-7.

student "to win", it added to individual students' sense of belonging. Some in the experienced students group pointed to orientation day as an important 'first' in terms of developing a sense of belonging, recalling how beneficial it was to meet fellow students in informal environments prior to meeting them in class. Other students described developing a sense of belonging when they could answer a question with confidence in the classroom.

For many students in the first-year group, receiving their first assessment grade and feedback was a pivotal moment in developing a sense of belonging. This was seen as an important objective source of information to determine whether they had the capacity to succeed, where they needed to improve, and what the educator thought of their work.[47]

One teacher within the educators group explained how they put a lot of thought into building relationships with their students that allow them to feel they can go to their teacher with a wide range of problems. This includes thinking about how to create a private, safe environment for students if they become emotional or experience anxiety. This is particularly important given that many first-year students have difficulty coping with the transition to university.[48] Some within the educators group explained that they encourage students to talk about themselves in class, but deliberately avoid questions that may invoke feelings of inferiority, for example, questions about their professional backgrounds or networks. Another teacher shared that they begin each class with a friendly discussion to break the ice, for example, asking 'Have you seen anything interesting in the news lately?', before diving into the formal content.

Teachers within the educators group also noted that mental health plays a significant role in students' ability and inclination to reach out to their educators if they require extra support and is directly linked to how connected they feel with the educator. If the educator is not building trusting relationships with their students, there is no way of knowing how many students are not reaching out and falling through the proverbial cracks. However, the practical difficulties of educators establishing strong personal connections with all or most of their students was also noted. The educators group reflected on the following questions: 'How much support and time does the educator offer each troubled student? Is it the teachers' responsibility to seek out students who appear to be struggling?' Individuals within the group felt

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[47] These findings point to the continued need to consider how feedback is provided to students in different learning contexts and formats. This was explored in detail in the recent study conducted by Isabella Sauchelli, Georgina Heath, Amanda Richardson, Sally Lewis, and Lisa Angelique Lim, 'You've Got Mail: A Technology-Mediated Feedback Strategy to Support Self-Regulated Learning in First-Year University Students' (2024) 15(1) *Student Success* 11, 19 which found that personalised, technology mediated feedback can be one way for educators to support students' self motivation, even if self -reported and observed implementation of learning strategies did not improve.

[48] Hattam and Stokes (n 20); Angela Jones, Anita Olds, Joanne G. Lisciandro, '*Transitioning Students into Higher Education Philosophy, Pedagogy and Practice*' (Routledge, 1st ed, 2020).

conflicted about their desire to provide individualised support for troubled students for whom they generally had strong empathy for, and the need to prioritise other aspects of their teaching preparation to meet the needs of the broader cohort of students in their course or classroom.

C   Can You Remember When You Felt Like You Did Not Belong in the First-Year Law Classroom?

When the first-year group was asked this question, students shared experiences of feeling ridiculed and belittled. Many recounted experiences of being ignored or feeling humiliated when asking questions in class and being offered minimal help by peers or educators. Students for whom English is their second language experienced these feelings regularly. Introverted and shy students described feeling picked on and singled out, forced to participate in a form determined by the educator's expectations, with little or no regard to the anxiety the student could be experiencing. The receipt of meaningful feedback was also identified as a key 'belonging' issue for many in the first-year group. Insufficient feedback – even in circumstances where the mark received was higher or above their own expectations - impacted their sense of belonging. A few students shared their experiences of feeling insulted by teacher feedback, that also failed to assist in their understanding the content. Some within the first-year group shared the view that an educator's lack of empathy for the challenges students' faced in their personal lives detracted from their sense of belonging in the classroom.

Some within the experienced students group explained that they struggled when the educator displayed minimal interaction with the class, for example, by not allowing many questions to be asked or reading straight from the textbook or lecture notes. Others described experiences that had them feeling unsafe to ask for explanations if further clarity was needed, for example when teachers had expressed doubt that they had in fact read key materials or engaged with video-recorded lecture material ahead of class. Some students took issue with being 'cold called' to answer questions in front of the class. They felt picked on and thought it unfair on students who may have anxiety or other hidden medical disorders. Students within the experienced students group also pointed to a lack of interest in their future and in graduate employment as contributing to a lack of belonging.

It was clear from both the student focus groups that an absence of belonging was a serious factor contributing to students' decisions to withdraw from a course or program, and something that also impacted their broader emotional state and mental well-being. Some within the first-year group, for example, explained feeling that they lack the intelligence and competency to study law. [49] For some, this has exacerbated pre-existing conditions including anxiety and depression.

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[49]   This may suggest some parallels with the concept of 'imposter syndrome' experienced by some law students, see, eg, Melanie Schwartz, 'Retaining Our Best : Imposter Syndrome, Cultural Safety, Complex Lives and Indigenous Student

Students within the experienced students group shared this view that a lack of belonging can have long term negative impacts on learning and mental health. A couple of students within this group failed their first assessment and felt they were spoken down to in the feedback, reaffirming their sense of failure. The reduced confidence in their abilities did not set them up well for the following assessments, and it took some time to realise they did belong at law school. However, others noted that it was possible to continue to develop confidence even after a negative first-year experience and move successfully through the degree.

D   Based on Your Past Experience, What Types of In-Class or Online Activities Are Effective at Creating a Sense of Student Belonging Within the Law Program?

In response to this question, the first-year group spoke of the value of formative assessments, activities, and collaborative group discussions as providing a risk-free opportunity for students to test their understanding, share alternative opinions and contribute to classroom debates. Interactive, anonymous and 'low stakes' activities like Mentimeter and Kahoot[50] were cited as useful for enabling the student and educator to connect through a 'knowledge check-in' that was orientated around having fun as well as revising course content. Students described feeling safe testing their knowledge or providing honest feedback via these online platforms. These platforms were also identified as tools to help create a sense of belonging in the law classroom by the experienced students group. Some within this group said Kahoot was a favourite as it broke up the tutorial or lecture, providing a 'brain break'. They explained that these type of online, interactive and anonymous quizzes engaged the whole class and there is a sense of friendly competition. Participation is quick, fun, and risk-free, creating a sense of inclusion for everyone, including those who might otherwise experience anxiety or reluctance to answer questions or engage with teachers or peers in class.

Many students in the first-year group valued icebreaking introductions used in the first class but suggested that they need to become less predictable and repetitive, for example, moving beyond asking students to share their name and their reason for studying law, or introducing more imaginative concepts for students to respond to. Students also commented that in some first classes, educators

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Experiences of Law School' (2018) 28(2) *Legal Education Review* 1; Sara L Ochs, 'Imposter Syndrome & The Law School Caste System', (2022) 42 *Pace Law Review* 373.

50   Mentimter and Kahoot are interactive online tools designed to elicit real time, anonymous response from students in online or face to face classroom settings. They can be accessed by student mobile phones and results can be displayed in real time. For further discussion see e.g. L Kohnke and B L Moorhouse, 'Using Kahoot! to Gamify Learning in the Language Classroom' (2022) 53(3) *RELC Journal*, 769-775; Alison Skoyles and Erin Bloxsidge, 'Have You Voted? Teaching OSCOLA with Mentimeter' (2017) 17(4) *Legal information management* 232.

introduced content that scared students regarding certain key expectations of student performance, such as those relating to referencing and plagiarism. While the first-year group acknowledged that this content is important to cover, they suggested reconsidering introducing this in the first class as it can make some students panic or increase their anxiety and worry around the first assessment. When reflecting on creating belonging in the online teaching context, the first-year group reflected positively on the benefit of breakout rooms, describing these smaller group environments as the only time they interacted with their peers in an interpersonal way.

Students in the first-year group also discussed orientation week as providing a potentially critical opportunity to start developing relationships with educators and peers, but many were unable to attend due to work commitments or distance and were disheartened by the more generic online alternatives.

The experienced students group students spoke about the importance of educator-facilitated class discussions as a pre-cursor for individual student belonging in the classroom. A range of different models of facilitated discussion were identified as having this potential positive impact. For example, holding a 10-minute window to talk reflectively about the previous week's class, more structured class debates or guest lectures. The experienced students' group also mentioned that an occasional 'social' tutorial would be beneficial, for example, at the pub[51]. Some within the experienced students group suggested that a belonging check-in should be considered at every year level, as it is not only first-years who need help. For example, the first-year focus group. Most students suggested that the belonging check-in could be as simple as an email from the educator, if the student had not been accessing the course content, handing up assessment late, or failing to attend class or respond to emails.

The educators' group was also asked to imagine a class where they considered they had successfully created the conditions for student belonging. One teacher shared the experience of an intensive class where, from the beginning, a positive, inclusive culture had been co-created with the students themselves, who also played a role in maintaining that positive culture and sharing it with guest speakers. Attendance was strong and consistent and there was a shared understanding about the value of the assessments for their future careers. Another educator reflected on the importance of the teacher having complete control of the course, including lectures and tutorials and assessment. The educator focus group reflected on the benefits of intensive teaching formats and small class sizes as being preconditions

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[51]   However it should be noted that many student wellbeing studies have warned against alcohol connected pedagogical activities as they exclude non-drinking students. See, eg, Lena Sanci et al, 'Towards a Health Promoting University: Descriptive Findings on Health, Wellbeing and Academic Performance amongst University Students in Australia' (2022) 22(1) *BMC Public Health* 2430; Jeanne-Marie Viljoen, Emily Miller and Vandana Arya, *An Investigation of International Undergraduate Students' Wellbeing and Sense of Belonging at the University of South Australia: Research Report* (University of South Australia, 2022).

for creating belonging in the classroom. These types of teaching and learning environments were described as providing space for educators to incorporate social experiences, for example, coffee before class. For the student focus groups, socialising at university was considered vital to forming bonds and is a crucial aspect of forming and maintaining that sense of belonging. The first-year student group and the experienced student group considered this to be more challenging in online learning environments. [52] Other aspects, like control over the timetabling of classes, and the ability to coordinate timetabling across a whole cohort (such as across different first-year courses) helped teachers to create the right preconditions for belonging as it encouraged regular on-campus attendance by students and created opportunities for informal social interactions between students and students and staff.

E   *Translating Insights into Belonging into Practical Strategies for Law Teachers*

The *Belonging Project* generated several important insights into how students and teachers conceptualise belonging in the law classroom, and how teachers and students can work together to create the preconditions for student belonging. These insights and findings have been used to develop a range of practical outputs for teachers to employ in law classrooms at UniSA, that are also designed to offer guidance for law teachers in other universities. In this next section of the article, we discuss key insights and findings from the *Belonging Project* with reference to two themes:

- Building and regulating emotional connection in the law classroom
- Creating the conditions for participation and interaction to foster belonging.

This is followed by a brief description of some of the practical outputs that were developed in consultation with law discipline staff at

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[52] The relationship between online learning and student belonging has attracted considerable scholarship in recent years, see e.g. Orna Farrell and James Brunton, 'A Balancing Act: A Window into Online Student Engagement Experiences' (2020) 17(1) *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 1; Lija Abu, 'Staff and Student Perspectives of Online Teaching and Learning; Implications for Belonging and Engagement at University – a Qualitative Exploration' (2021) 14(3) *Compass (Eltham)*; Martina van Heerden and Sharita Bharuthram, '"It Does Not Feel like I am a University Student": Considering the Impact of Online Learning on Students' Sense of Belonging in a "Post Pandemic" Academic Literacy Module' (2023) 41(3) *Perspectives in Education* 95; Clarice Tang, 'Impact of Online Learning on Sense of Belonging among first-year Clinical Health Students during COVID-19: Student and Academic Perspectives' (2023) 23(1) *BMC Medical Education* 100; Angela Page et al, 'Fostering School Connectedness Online for Students with Diverse Learning Needs: Inclusive Education in Australia during the COVID-19 Pandemic' (2021) 36(1) *European Journal Of Special Needs Education* 142; Trixie James et al, 'We Were All Learning and Doing Our Best : Investigating How Enabling Educators Promoted Student Belonging in a Time of Significant Complexity and Unpredictability' (2022) 19(4) *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*.

UniSA and have been employed following the completion of the project.

Building and Regulating Emotional Connection in the Law Classroom

Of all the identified factors that build the sense of belonging, the importance of developing and maintaining a social connection between and among peers and teachers had the highest response across all three focus groups. Once a solid social connection was established in the classroom, there was positive flow on benefits for student participation and engagement, student confidence in their own learning outcomes, and attitudes towards the law faculty and university.[53] For students, building a meaningful connection with a teacher can give rise to feelings of mutual trust, which in turn helps build a safe learning environment in the classroom. The classroom itself then becomes a comfortable space for students to seek support outside, ask questions without fear, participate in discussions, reveal challenges and struggles, and identify actions to address other barriers to participation and engagement, such as those connected with a disability.

The findings from the focus groups discussed above highlight that when it comes to building positive social relationships between students and teachers, or among students in the law classroom, the first encounters really matter. These initial moments of interaction can have a long-term impact on whether the student proceeds to develop relationships of trust with teachers or peers, when can lead to sustained feelings of belonging in the classroom. The type of 'first encounters' that really matter include the first visit to campus, the first interaction with online learning interface, the first introduction to staff and other students at orientation, the teacher's first welcome to the classroom, the first learning task, the student's first response to a question or comment by another student and the first assessments. As a result, paying close attention to the quality of these 'firsts' is one of the key recommendations of the *Belonging Project*. first-year law teachers should plan early to make the first encounters with students as thoughtful as possible, and first-year course coordinators should undertake to ensure that any teaching staff coming into contact with students (including casual staff and guest teachers) are aware of the importance of first impressions.

There are many ways educators and faculties can plan to make sure these 'first encounters' are high quality experiences for students. One key consideration is to ensure a strong focus on inclusive language in any written or oral first communications between teachers or university staff and students. This includes thinking carefully about approaches that focus on describing the professional experiences and expertise of the teacher. Whilst this may have the effect of inspiring some students, or reassuring others that they are being taught by a high achieving professional, it can also create a sense of alienation, exclusion or anxiety among students who may not be familiar with the terminology

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[53]   This aligns with the findings of Mahoney, Kumar and Sabasi (n 8) 54-57.

or concepts being referred to by the speaker. This can in turn to confirm any underlying fears held by the student that they are 'not good enough' for law, or do not belong. As an alternative, the *Belonging Project* recommends that educators or university staff introduce themselves with reference to a social skill or experience that is important to them, for example a reference to their hobbies or travel experiences, and then work with students to discuss what a 'good' law student might look like in their particular learning context. This could include collectively reflecting on the way we describe the success or impact of high performing lawyers or law students, the way we describe the skills or attributes of good lawyers or good law students and the examples we choose to focus on in class. Further strategies for ensuring high quality 'firsts' are detailed below.

Focus on the 'Firsts'

Teachers should plan to be in the (virtual or physical) classroom before the students and think about projecting welcome with their voice and body language. One suggested strategy is to conceptualise of the teacher's role in the first class as being like a host at a party, [54] helping people to interact with each other and communicating the basics like where the bathrooms are, and where they might like to sit. Just like at a party, if the teacher sees someone by themselves, they should try and speak to them kindly and encourage them to do something practical, such as introducing themselves to the person sitting next to them, accessing the relevant online learning platform, highlighting a key point from the text they have read or noting down two dot points about their previous engagement with legal concepts or ideas in their own lives. .

Course coordinators should encourage students and teachers to share something about themselves in a way that reveals something related to the skills or tools they bring to the classroom and something about themselves as a person.[55] Examples and stories that reveal the psychological challenges of descending into the metaphorical 'learning pit' [56] when grappling with a new legal concept, and then slowly emerging from that uncomfortable experience into a more comfortable learning position, are particularly valuable. Lots of people find drawing on an experience relating to travel, sport, community engagement or artistic pursuits useful for this, but everyone in the classroom should feel encourage to share what feels safe to them. Teachers should practice this ahead of time, so that they can model the type of tone and content they are looking for students to share.

Classroom teachers should plan for multiple check in points during the first class to ensure that everyone can understand what is being

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[54] Brie Willoughby-Knox, 'Becoming a Guide on the Side: learner-Centred Teaching in the Internationalised Classroom' (2017) 1(1) *International Journal of Teaching and Case Studies* 1.

[55] This aligns with the 'funds of knowledge' pedagogy explored by Gonzalez (n 24).

[56] Sarah Moulds, 'Visible learning at law school: an Australian approach to improving teacher impact in intensive and online courses' (2021) 55(2) *The Law Teacher* 169.

shared or discussed. There might be students for whom English is a second language, perhaps teachers are speaking quickly, maybe there is background noise, maybe teachers or students referred to job roles students might not be familiar with (for example, 'working at the Crown') or maybe students are worried about something else, including being in the wrong room. Knowledge check ins that provide opportunities for anonymous questions to be asked (for example via Mentimeter or similar) are useful to encourage engagement from those experiencing barriers or anxiety raising questions orally.

Teachers should be encouraged to describe what students can realistically expect from them inside and outside the classroom, and what the boundaries are when it comes to teacher/student contact. It is natural for teachers to want to project the sense that they will always be available to students, but this is unrealistic, unfair on teaching staff and can be confusing for students. Similarly, it can be tempting to list all the thousands of things teachers are doing that will make it hard for them to respond to students, but this can also deter students from asking for help when they really need it. Instead, teaching staff should be encouraged to share clear information about things like: (a) how students should address you in class (for example what title or name they should use when referring to the teacher); (b) how students should ask questions or provide comments in class (for example by using the chat function or raising their hand); (c) how or whether students should contact teaching staff outside of class; (d) how the teacher fits in with other people in the course, including course coordinators.

Orientation programs and other first-year cohort wide programs should focus on unpacking the hidden curriculum of university studies for students.[57] This can include practical matters such as how to find teaching spaces on campus and on line, what type of behaviour is expected of students inside the classroom, whether and how students should communicate with teachers if they are unable to attend class or have access requirements related to a disability. It also means unpacking – ideally with modelled examples – what is meant by common instructions such as 'do the readings' or 'take notes for the assessment'. The meaning of these types of instructions is often taken for granted by teaching staff, leaving those students without prior relevant experience at risk of misunderstanding what is required of them, and feeling reluctant to ask for help.

The student focus groups considered above consistently emphasised the need to establish safe ways to share things about themselves with their teachers. This points to a need for teaching staff to incorporate a diverse range of pathways for students to share information about themselves as learners with relevant teaching staff. This could include, for example, a virtual or physical postcard to the course coordinator, clear information about how to facilitate a one-on-one meeting with the

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[57]   This is similar to the findings of George Koutsouris, Anna Mountford-Zimdars and Karisti Dingwall, 'The 'Ideal' Higher Education Student: Understanding the Hidden Curriculum to Enable Institutional Change' (2021) 26(2) *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 131.

course coordinator, the use of Mentimeter slides to explore biggest worries or concerns, facilitating group discussions to brainstorm what students consider to be their strongest and weakest study skills.

There is also a need to invest in options for students who miss out on the 'usual firsts', such as the first class in a course or orientation. In-person, video or audio messages can be useful in some circumstances, but can also exacerbate feelings of anxiety, so multiple strategies may need to be included to gently welcome back those who missed the 'usual firsts'.

Creating the Conditions for Participation and Interaction to Foster Belonging

As discussed above, connection among student peers and with the educators were paramount to creating a sense of belonging. This extends to connections made or maintained outside the law classroom. Those students who experienced the strongest sense of belonging were those who were able to translate feelings of trust, safety and empowerment from the classroom into the broader university environment.[58] However, many students who participated in the focus groups spoke of lacking the initial confidence to participate in classroom activities, which they reported exacerbated feelings of isolation and exclusion in later years, particularly as the need for more external networks became increasingly significant for identifying and pursuing career aspirations.

The responses described above provide some insights into what the preconditions for participation and engagement in the law classroom look like, and how they can be achieved in practice. These include environmental factors – what the classroom looks and feels like, and how students are arranged in groups, and how information is presented online – as well as they design of learning activities and assessment. For example, the first-year and experienced student focus suggested utilising formative and summative assessment strategies early in a course to encourage student confidence and participation. Students want to feel like they 'can do it', and early, visible praise from educators was seen as a valuable incentive for class participation - a precondition for belonging. Other techniques, such as clear assessment instructions with examples that include specific indications of grade quality, were also seen as important ensuring the first assessment is a positive experience for students.

Creating the right conditions for engagement also means accepting that while peer connection is vital, it is not always easy to establish and may not be within the full control of the teacher. For example, the two? student focus groups recognised that students want formal and informal chances to connect with other students (preferably face to face but also online). Students also want to work collaboratively with others in the classroom but do not always enjoy formal group work especially if they

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58   This is similar to the findings of Mahoney, Kumar and Sabasi (n 8) 54-57.

do not have control over who they work with, or how they approach certain activities.

Creating conditions for engagement also means thinking carefully about the relationship between formal and informal learning activities and assessment as well as the nature of the feedback students receive in response to assessment. The *Belonging Project* has considered how to address these factors when developing the practical outputs described below.

Co-design What a 'Good' Law Student and a Good Lawyer Looks Like

One of the key findings of the *Belong Project* is that students can experience a sense of belonging when they feel that their teachers and peers understand and value their lived experience, and when they can see aspects of themselves reflected in the attributes of a 'good law student'. Law teachers can help create the preconditions for this experience by providing opportunities for their classrooms to 'co-design' what a 'good' law student looks like, rather than projecting their own assumptions as to what attributes or experiences a student holds, which are often informed by the teachers own experiences. These types of co-design activities also enable teachers to model behaviours in the classroom that help promote belonging, such as inclusive language and challenging unconscious bias. For this reason, the *Belonging Project* suggests that when designing first-year courses, teachers consider what elements of their course students can control or help shape. Giving some control back to students can increase sense of belonging and allow students to 'play to their strengths' as they find their place in the course.[59]

Early Wins are Good – Formative and Summative Assessment

The *Belonging Project* has underscored that students' sense of belonging in the law classroom can be impacted by the types of learning activities they are involved with and by the nature of the feedback they receive from teachers and peers when they share their opinions or offer an answer to a question or undertake a formative or summative assessment task.

The answers provided by student-based focus groups revealed strong support for learning activities that enable students to experience early wins. The type of activities students pointed to as being particularly good to facilitate these early wins include things like in

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[59]   This may have a relationship with some of the literature exploring the impact of positive psychology and autonomy on learning outcomes in higher education settings. See Ehsan Namaziandost and Tahereh Heydarnejad, 'Mapping the Association Between Productive Immunity, Emotion Regulation, Resilience, and Autonomy in Higher Education' (2023) 8(1) *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* 1; Scott J Shelton-Strong, 'Advising in Language Learning and the Support of Learners' Basic Psychological Needs: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective' (2022) 26(5) *Language Teaching Research* 963.

class or online interactive quizzes and opportunities to share good quality shortcuts to assist in the preparation of longer assessment tasks. Educators also pointed to these activities as examples of ways to generate student belonging in the classroom. For example, some teachers spoke about the value of practising 'law talk' in the classroom by encouraging students to identify relevant news items and identify legal issues or parties to a dispute. This could be used in conjunction with a skills-based task, for example practising summarising or referencing a source, or sharing how to identify an argument and offer a critical perspective. The opportunity to hear from students who have 'been there, done that' was also something identified in the focus groups as providing an opportunity to promote belonging. This could include utilising narrative interventions to help ease student anxiety in advance of first assessment.[60] For example, students could be provided with access to an interview with a past student about their worries prior to completing the first assessment and their feelings about assessment following their experience.[61]

Peer Connection Essential, But it May Be a Bumpy Road

The focus groups conducted as part of the *Belonging Project* all emphasised the important role of peer-to-peer student connexion, and the opportunity to build social relationships in an informal setting, as being essential for building and maintaining student belonging in the law classroom. However, the student-based focus groups revealed a complex relationship with formal student group activities and achieving an individual sense of belonging. Assessable groupwork, for example, was identified as a cause of stress and anxiety for some students, occasionally leading to experiences of isolation frustration and lack of belonging. This was particularly the case when students lacked control over who was in the group and how they would work together. By way of contrast, opportunities for more informal discussions with classmates in relaxed tutorial environments were recognised by the student focus groups as offering important opportunities to promote student belonging in the classroom. This suggests that course coordinators should think carefully about how they incorporate peer to peer interactions in their law classrooms and ensure that if they are including assessable group work, they accompany those activities with a range of supports to ensure that students who might already be experiencing anxiety or social alienation are not further ostracised through group work activity. It also suggests that providing multiple and diverse opportunities for informal peer to peer contact among students is likely to help promote student belonging in the law classroom.

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[60]   J Rosen Valverde, 'Using Narrative Therapy to Re-Author the Dominant Law Student Narrative, Foster Professional Identity Development, and Restore Hope' (2021) 28 *Clinical Law Review* 329.

[61]   Anita Mackay, 'Capturing Peer-To-Peer Mentoring Advice: A Podcast Series for First-Year Law Students' (2024) 15(1) *Student Success* 114.

Use Assessment to Make Skills Visible

The *Belonging Project* revealed that students' sense of belonging is supported when students feel like they understand what is expected of them as a learner and they can work through any feelings of anxiety or uncertainty about assessment with peers and teachers in a safe environment. This is particularly important for first-year law students' sense of belonging. Students need to prove to themselves and sometimes their families and peers that they are good enough to be studying law. At the same time, law students are frequently asked to rapidly adapt to a foreign professional culture and a new language of tertiary-level learning, and so assessment tasks can seem overwhelming. One way for teachers to help address the sense of anxiety around assessment is to very explicitly show students what they are expecting in terms of assessment tasks – sometimes described as 'visible learning'. [62] In his 2009 publication, *Visible learning for teachers: Maximising impact on learning* Hattie describes this concept as a shift in teaching mindset– where both the teacher and the student are explicitly clear about the learning goal, and progress towards that goal is actively monitored, with a view to assessing teacher impact on student progress towards learning goals, and adjusting teaching practice if progress is not occurring. [63] 'Visible learning' therefore requires detailed success criteria being made available to the student at the outset, with regular feedback on student progress and teacher impact throughout the learning process.[64] As Hattie explains:

> [S]tudents should not be expected to "work out" what is to be learnt and what it means to be successful in that learning (often they only learn this when they get the results of assessment back), but instead it is necessary to make these criteria of success clear before any teaching or assessment. Without such alignment the powerful effects of feedback, reporting from assessment and self-regulated learning are less likely to occur.[65]

This approach maybe particularly pertinent to developing a sense of belonging for school leavers entering the law program. [66]

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[62] Moulds (n 56) 169-185.

[63] J A Hattie, *Visible learning for teachers: Maximising impact on learning* (2013, Routledge). See also Moulds, (n 56) 169-185.

[64] John A Hattie, A D Masters and K Birth, *Visible learning in action* (2015, Routledge, UK).

[65] John A Hattie, 'The Applicability of Visible Learning to High Education' (2015) 1(1) *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology* 79, 87.

[66] This approach also aligns with the observations and findings presented in the recent US study M Lynn Breyfogle and Kimberley Daubman, 'Increasing Undergraduate Student Retention with "Psychology of Success" a Course for First-Year Students on Academic Warning' (2024) 15(1) *Student Success* 86, 87 which explores and evaluates a specific first-year College of Arts & Sciences program that utilises positive psychology and strength-based approaches and is 'designed to help students set academic and personal goals, develop action steps to achieve those goals, and engage in regular self - reflection about progress toward their goals'.

V Conclusion

This project is modest in focus and necessarily limited in scope, given its location within UniSA. However, the themes of student belonging and engagement have a broader relevance to law teachers in other jurisdictions. The *Belonging Project* builds on the growing scholarship around student belonging, including the influential work of Kift[67] and more recent studies by Mahoney, Kumar and Sabsabi,[68] but seeks to redirect the inquiry away from extracurricular activities and faculty level transition experiences, towards what happens within the law classroom.

The *Belonging Project* was informed by pedagogies that value students lived experience as an important source of knowledge and relational power within the law classroom[69] and by mixed methods approaches[70] that enable perspectives from teachers and students to be considered alongside student evaluation of teaching data. The project also values the experiences of first-year law teachers who are motivated by and committed to creating an environment of safety and belonging and a place where learning can thrive.

The *Belonging Project* also reminds teachers, course coordinators, program directors and others involved in curriculum design of the need to focus carefully on constructive alignment[71] between learning activities in assessment and on the form and content of feedback given to first-year students, particularly when it comes to the first assessment. However, it is important to emphasise that the potential for these strategies to impact positively on individual student's learning experiences depends upon the broader teaching and learning environment at the University, and the suite of external supports that might be available to students, particularly those experiencing multiple or intersecting barriers to participation and engagement.[72] This includes ensuring that student belonging is integrated into all aspects of curriculum design and faculty strategic planning.[73] It also means addressing factors such as student access to income supports, childcare, transport and housing, as well as teacher access to training, professional development and sustainable workload allocation.[74]

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[67]   See Kift (n 21).

[68]   Mahoney, Kumar and Sabasi (n 8).

[69]   See further C A Parker-Shandal, 'Relational Connections in Classroom Curriculum: Power and Privilege in Diverging Perspectives' in *Restorative Justice in the Classroom: Liberating Students' Voices Through Relational Pedagogy* (Springer International Publishing, 2023) 167.

[70]   This type of mixed methods approach has been described by Dina C Maramba, and Samuel D Museus, 'The Utility of Using Mixed-Methods and Intersectionality Approaches in Conducting Research on Filipino American Students' Experiences with the Campus Climate and on Sense of Belonging' (2011) 151 *New directions for institutional research* 93, 94-95.

[71]   See, eg, O Fransson, and T Friberg, 'Constructive Alignment: From Professional Teaching Technique To Governance Of Profession (2015) 5(2) *European Journal of Higher Education* 141.

[72]   This is similar to the findings of Ahn and Davis (n 8); Bowes and Brindle (n 3).

[73]   This is similar to the findings of Gravett and Ajjawi (n 13).

[74]   See further Bowes and Brindle (n 3); van Gijn-Grosvener and Huisman (n 8).

In this way the *Belonging Project* aligns closely with the recent work of Blake, Capper and Jackson[75] and provides a useful case study example of how the four key elements to belonging identified in that study - connection, inclusion, support and autonomy – manifest in the law classroom context.[76] These scholars highlighted the following key barriers to generating and sustaining a sense of belonging in the university classroom:

- a lack of integration between the course and curriculum and the wider experience, which created detachment from the wider university and hindered staffs' ability to shared responsibility;
- poor mental health which was found to have affected all aspects of university life; and
- cultural and systemic barriers, creating the most significant issues for students as active learners.[77]

Blake et al found that overworked and under supported staff with competing priorities, was a significant issue and in need of addressing to increase belonging, inclusion and academic confidence for students.[78] Similar considerations underpin the findings in the *Belonging Project* which has revealed complex and nuanced understandings of what belonging means for students and teachers in the first-year classroom. The project has also identified a commonality around the need to promote emotional connection within the classroom between students, and between students and teachers and the need to create the conditions for participation and engagement for students of all walks of life, particularly those who may not have had direct interactions with members of the legal profession, or other encounters or experiences with university study.

The *Belonging Project* has also generated practical tools and checklists that can be shared with permanent and casual teaching staff that remind teachers how important their first interactions are with students to create the foundations for relationships of trust to be developed, and to support engaged learning. Although limited by its small sample size, it is hoped that the thematic insights into the relationship between student belonging and learning in the law classroom revealed by this project contributes in a small way to the growing scholarship that is directed towards improving our understanding of student belonging in higher education.

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[75] Blake, Capper and Jackson (n 7).
[76] Ibid 3.
[77] Ibid 7-8.
[78] Ibid 39-40.